

## The Diving Platform

I used to come here with my grandparents. Every summer, Mummy and Daddy would drive me from London, have lunch (Grandma and Grandpa were Daddy's Mummy and Daddy) and then leave me for a week. Those weeks were always the happiest of my life, filled with fun and laughter, sunshine and love. Unfortunately, there weren't many of them, as I lost Grandma and Grandpa when I was still quite a little boy. Anyway, every year, on my last day, the three of us would climb into Grandpa's car, and he'd drive us all here. We'd stay all day. Sometimes Grandma and Grandpa would come down onto the beach, but when I got a bit older, they'd sit on one of the benches halfway down the path, Grandma with her knitting and Grandpa with his newspaper and they'd keep an eye on me while I built sandcastles or paddled in the shallows, sunburnt and carefree. The only rule was that I had to stay where they could see me.

Grandpa liked that bench the best, because it was surrounded by rosebushes and he loved roses and used to say that the only good reason for being famous was that someone might name a rose after you. I wanted to name a rose after him, even though he wasn't famous and I was going to do it, when I got bigger, for his birthday, but I never got the chance.

I was never lonely on those days, because there were always other children to play with, and other children wanted to play with me because Grandma and Grandpa always bought me a brand new bucket and spade or a beach ball.

Some of the children had beach huts and once I was invited in to one and it was lovely in there and they were a nice family, and I decided there and then that I would have a beach hut when I was big, and I never did that either. I remember that when I was in there, all hell was suddenly let loose outside. There was shouting and all sorts of commotion which was strange because usually the only raised voices you ever heard were laughing. We peeped outside and it was Grandma and Grandpa with some people I'd never seen before and they were all shouting my name, and I heard Grandma saying 'He's blond and about this high and wearing red trunks.' I didn't half get a rocket from Grandpa when I came out because when I'd been in the beach hut they couldn't see me and they didn't know where I was and they'd got really frightened and I cried and cried because I didn't understand why Grandpa was so angry rather than being happy to see me. He'd never been cross with me before and I knew I'd upset Grandma and after that we went straight to their car and drove back to their house in silence, and I never set foot inside a beach hut again.

We did come back here for the next few years, and as I got bigger I was allowed to go a bit further into the sea, as long as they could see me. In those days, there was a diving platform floating what seemed an awfully long way out with a ladder going down into the sea. Grandpa told me that it was anchored to the sea bed so that sunbathers didn't fall asleep and wake up in France, which he said was a fate worse than death. You had a great view of the platform from Grandma and Grandpa's bench. It was always full of bigger children clambering on and jumping off and I longed to go out there to clamber on and jump off, But Grandma and Grandpa said it was too far out and that I wasn't a strong enough swimmer and maybe I could do it when I was bigger. I used to watch the other children enviously and wonder what bigger meant, and how you'd know when you arrived at it, or whether bigger was just an excuse that grown-ups used to stop you doing things they were frightened of.

One year, a couple of years after the beach hut, when I was bigger, but still not by enough, I went out to the diving platform without permission. I'd been playing quite happily on my own, when a boy I'd never seen before came along and smashed up the sandcastle I was building. It was a very big and detailed castle, with crenellated battlements, and gargoyles made from shells, and a driftwood drawbridge, and topped off with a new flag Grandma had bought me. I'd worked really hard on it, and made up stories in my head about the knights and fine ladies who lived in it, and I couldn't wait to show it to Grandma and Grandpa. He came up and stood looking at it, for a moment. 'That must have taken forever,' he said. I nodded and he said, 'Loser,' and kicked it all in. Then he pushed me over, and ran away laughing. He ran towards my brand new beach ball which had blown along the beach a bit, and he picked it up and I chased after him and told him to give it back and he called me a name and said I'd have to get it off him, but he was holding it too high, and I couldn't reach, and then he pushed me over again and picked up a sharp pebble and popped my brand new beach ball and threw it at me, and walked away laughing. Trying not to cry (not in front of him, anyway), I went back up to the bench among the roses to ask Grandma and Grandpa if I could have an ice-cream (which was always an expedition because they weren't allowed to sell them on the beach and you had to go back into town). They'd both nodded off in the sunshine, and it didn't seem right to wake them up just for an ice-cream. As they were asleep, they weren't living up to their part of the bargain, so I decided there and then to swim out to the diving platform. I didn't want to be on the beach with the horrible boy anyway, and there was nothing else to do.

It was exciting going out there, exciting and frightening and as I got closer, I started to wish I hadn't because the sea was lapping against my chin and every wave carried my feet off the bottom and I'd drift away to the side a little and I was getting tired and worried about how I'd get back and about how upset Grandma and Grandpa would be if they woke up while I was still out there and then suddenly I was holding on to the ladder. I heaved myself up and lay on the deck. It was made of wood, quite splintery and rough and lovely and warm. There was no-one else on it, so I lay down for a while with my eyes shut, feeling the breeze and gently bobbing up and down with the sea, as if we were both breathing together. Every so often a shout of laughter would be blown to me from the beach, and I could feel the little hairs on my legs straightening up one by one as the sun dried them. I felt more tingling and alive at that moment than I ever had before. The fact that I wasn't supposed to be there made it even better. I'd finally arrived at bigger, and I knew that when I told Grandma and Grandpa, they'd understand.

Suddenly there was a terrible pain in my side. I opened my eyes, and there was the nasty boy, kicking me.

'This is my castle,' he said. 'You've got to get off.'

He kicked me again. I started to get up.

'It's not a castle,' I said. 'It's a diving platform and everyone's allowed to be here.'

'You're not,' he said, and pushed me really hard.

'You're a bully,' I said, trying my hardest not to cry.

'You're a girl,' he said.

'I'm not,' I said.

'You cry like one,' he said, and pushed me again. 'Are you going to get off, or do I have to make you?'

'I hate you,' I said.

'Good,' he said. 'I hate all girls.'

‘I’m not a girl!’

All the time he was moving closer to me. I backed away, trying to stay out of reach. Suddenly, he lurched forwards, and shoved me with all his might, and I was flying through the air.

That was the last year coming here with Grandma and Grandpa. I lost them when I was still young, but the memory of those summer days is still so vivid, and the place still exerts a strange pull. There are new grandparents looking after new grandchildren, sitting on the bench among the roses. The beach huts have new people in them, sometimes the children I played with, grown up. In town there are new shops, but you still can’t get an ice-cream on the beach. The diving platform’s gone. It went in my last year because some kid went out there and must have fallen off and he was found ten days later two miles up the coast with a big lump out of his head. When you’re here all the time, you don’t notice the changes so much. It’s like when you’re a child and someone who hasn’t seen you for a year says, ‘Haven’t you grown?’, when people who see you every day don’t notice.

It’s still mostly a place for people at either end of their lives. People in their middle years, who want more sophisticated pleasures don’t come here until they’ve got children or old people of their own, and that’s the way we like it.

Each summer I come back. I can’t help it. Something brings me back here; the forlorn hope of recapturing the past, perhaps. I go about my business, no-one notices me, and I don’t bother them. I don’t make friends easily, and sometimes I’m very lonely. I still feel like the little boy who came here with his grandparents and looked for other children to play with.

And this year, I got my wish. He came back. I knew he would. Everyone does eventually, and I’d been waiting for him. Such a long time. He’d changed, of course. A middle-aged man now, with a wife and children of his own. I knew him straight away, and even if I hadn’t, his son looked the dead spit of him all those years ago. I sat down beside them on the beach. They didn’t notice me, but I could hear them.

‘Why didn’t you want to come here, Daddy?’ said the boy. He seemed a very sensitive, sweet-natured little boy, not like his father had been. I would have loved to have played with him.

‘It’s not that I didn’t want to. I just don’t remember this place as fondly as Mummy does, that’s all. She wanted to come back and have an all our yesterdays, so here we are.’

‘You might have played here with Mummy when you were children, never knowing that you’d end up married.’

‘Yes, I suppose it’s possible. But I played with allsorts of children. Mostly boys.’

He looked out to sea, lost in thought. Suddenly, I saw him start.

‘Good God,’ he said. ‘I thought they’d got rid of that thing years ago.’

‘What thing, Daddy?’

‘Out there. It’s a diving platform. Can’t believe I hadn’t noticed it before.’

‘Can we go out there, Daddy?’

‘Absolutely not. Far too dangerous. Those things are an accident waiting to happen.’

‘Please.’

‘No. It’s too far out and you’re not a strong enough swimmer. Now stop going on about it. Your Mother will be back with the ice-creams before you know it.’

As the afternoon wore on, he kept looking anxiously out to sea, but eventually, he lay down and nodded off, as I knew he would.

His son was down on the beach, building a sandcastle. I walked across the warm, wet sand and tapped him on the shoulder. He looked up at me and smiled. It was the most lovely smile. I bent down and whispered in his ear. He looked over at his sleeping father and nodded. He stood up, and hand in hand we walked down to the sea.

We had such fun on the diving platform, feeling the sun beating down on the deck as we rose and fell with the waves. Suddenly, we heard a shout, and we could see his father swimming towards us. He climbed up the ladder and stood there dripping and breathing heavily.

‘What the hell do you think you’re playing at?’ he shouted. ‘I told you you weren’t allowed to come out here. How dare you? Come here this instant.’

At that moment, he saw me. I smiled. He frowned at me, as if he was remembering something. And then I saw all the colour drain from his face.

‘Right. Now. Don’t stand there gaping at me,’ he screamed. ‘This minute, or I’ll give you a bloody good hiding.’

I could see that he was frightening his son, who was cowering and backing slowly away.

‘I said now!’ He started advancing on the boy. I knew what was going to happen, but there was nothing I could do to stop it.

When he came back to the surface, I stretched out my hand and helped him up the ladder. We sat side by side on the warm deck, holding hands. Somehow the platform had come adrift and we were slowly floating away from the shore. His father was frantically swimming backwards and forwards and every so often we could hear him desperately crying out his son’s name.

We turned to each other and smiled.

I’ll come back again next summer. But now, I’ll never be lonely again.